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1-1-1994

Introduction: Poetry and Mass Culture

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Published version. *Chicago Review*, Vol. 40, No. 2/3 (1994): 1-2. [Permalink](#). © 1994 University of Chicago Press. Used with permission.

Introduction

This special issue of *Chicago Review* traces and blurs the connections between poetry and mass culture. The project evolved not from a theory about poetry and mass culture, but rather from the practical task of reading unsolicited manuscripts. I noticed that sonnets to Jimi Hendrix, or monologues delivered by Barbie, grabbed and held my attention, while post-Shelleyan paeans to Prometheus did not. I realized that I was responding to a powerful common language that elevates Elvis into immortality, that makes “Twilight Zone” reruns work as reruns of my own childhood, and that crystallizes my most archaic fears around Jeffrey Dahmer. This common language can seem deadeningly clichéd when it pours straight from the television. But when mass culture is filtered through forms of private life, or through forms of poetry, it becomes at once familiar and strange, public and personal, trivial and yet overwhelmingly important to our experience as late-twentieth century readers.

The poets in this issue use mass culture self-consciously and critically, but seldom contemptuously. Excepting a handful of neo-Luddites, most of us inhabit a world where mass culture is too pervasive to be dismissed. On a formal level, some poets recruit mass culture’s ubiquity as an organizing principle for the personal lyric, as when Mark Cox uses outdoor showings of *Oklahoma* and *Damn Yankees* to remember his prepubescent self “projected on the earth.” Often, though, mass culture’s wild semiotic overgrowth puts pressure on the lyric poem’s coherence, as in the cognitively wrenching logic of David Wojahn’s “Cienfuegos Road,” or Brian Young’s surreal “Summer Tanager.”

On the level of content, as most of us know from Hollywood films and Miller Lite commercials, mass culture requires beautiful bodies. Such bodies do appear in this issue, courtesy of Michael Jackson, Melanie Griffith, and two (count ’em, two) aerobics instructors—not to mention Sally Field,

the flying nun who graces our cover. As the Body Beautiful filters through poetry, however, it becomes peculiarly violent and disjointed. Charlene Fix's teenagers steal a mannequin hand; Denise Duhamel's Barbie loses an arm; and Robert Daly's operatic duo, the Aardwolf and the Spoon, literally fall to pieces when confronted with Winona Ryder. One rather surprising aspect of this special issue is its masses of brains and bodies breaking down, flying apart, or collapsing into one another.

Another surprising, and initially dismaying, aspect of the issue is its relatively small population of women. Like the rock shows that I attended in college, this mass cultural "event" features two men for every woman. It is, of course, a commonplace of feminist theory that mass cultural forms like film and rock music tend to posit women as passive objects of "the gaze" rather than as active performers or spectators. If this generalization contains a grain of truth, then perhaps we received fewer submissions from women because they feel limited by mass cultural frames. Sometimes, however, what looks like limitation can be turned into poetic strength. Aliki Barnstone, for example, gives a strong description of her sense of helplessness as developed through Alfred Hitchcock and "The Twilight Zone." Furthermore, although men are overrepresented as authors in this issue, male speakers and subjects do not always hold the remote control. They also appear as erotic spectacles (Reginald Shepherd's "beauty" at the post office); as cross-gender role models (Elizabeth Alexander's Joe Louis); or as icons to be dethroned (Michael Evans's hypertextual Buffalo Bill).

While the poems in this issue cannot be jammed into one theoretical box, they do work together to generate an edgy and multivalent account of American mass culture. Readers might consider the opening poem, Jonah Winter's "Duet for Channel Three and Channel Seven," as a gloss on the rest of the issue: each poem develops its own mass cultural logic, just as "genetic patterns are really different between different cats." And, as Winter's poem suggests, channel-surfing—between poems as between stations—can reveal, if not a coherent whole, then at least a series of odd and provocative juxtapositions.